Practical Skills for Challenging Behaviors in the Classroom: Supporting Children of All Abilities

Northwest Center Kids
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Learning Objectives

- Understand the function of behavior
- Interpreting behavior through a sensory lens
- Understanding how trauma relates to behavior
- Behavior Supports in the classroom
- Observation and ABC Charts to identify patterns in behavior
Common Functions of Behavior

- Attention (positive or negative)
- Escape/Avoidance (getting out of having to do a task or activity)
- Sensory stimulation (“It feels good”, or “I’m bored”)
- Access to desired items (toys, activities)
- Meeting basic needs: food/sleep/safety

ALL BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION!
Behavior

- Hungry
- Tired
- Feeling ignored
- Frustrated
- Jealous
- Sick/not feeling well
- Bored
- Sensory
- Trauma
- Confused
What is a challenging behavior?

- A behavior that is challenging to the adult.
- It’s subjective, and perceived as challenging by the adult.
- Interpreted through the adult’s own experiences, opinions, and beliefs around expectations of children.
Levels of Arousal

Image 3. Link
Behavior through a Sensory Lens

**Sensory Avoiding**
Kids avoid sensory input because it’s too overwhelming.

**Sensory Seeking**
Kids look for more sensory stimulation.

REMEMBER: kids can be both SEEKING and AVOIDING
Sensory Avoiding

- Seeks out quiet spots in noisy, crowded environments.
- Is easily startled by sudden noises (or may put hands over ears).
- Is bothered by bright light.
- Refuses to wear itchy or otherwise uncomfortable clothing.
- Avoids touching people or hugging them.
- Has a strong reaction to the texture or smell of certain foods.
- Refuses to try new foods and has a very limited diet of preferred foods.
- Gets upset about small changes in routine or environment and avoids trying new things.
- Avoids playground equipment or going barefoot in grass/sand.
Strategies for Sensory Avoiders

- Give children a quiet place to calm down when overwhelmed
- Maintain a predictable routine
- Give warnings before transitions
- Environmental adaptations:
  - Lighting
  - Noise level
  - Physical arrangement of room

Challenging behaviors in sensory avoiders can often be solved by fixing environmental factors
Sensory Seeking

- Constantly touches objects, may be messy
- Tastes, smells, and mouths objects
- Loud noises and sounds
- Plays roughly and takes physical risks
- Has a high tolerance for pain
- Often squirms and fidgets
- Is constantly on the move
- Invades other people’s personal space (or hangs on people/furniture)
- Often gets distracted
Strategies for Sensory Seekers

- Give the child an active job (e.g., going with a teacher to take something to the office)
- Let the child stand, move, or pace during circle time
- Give them a “fidget” toy during activities with low sensory input
- Provide opportunities for “deep pressure” (e.g., big hugs/squeezes, wheelbarrow walking, jumping, pushing the wall or furniture, squeezing play dough)
- Squeezing, hanging, jumping
- Spinning, swinging, climbing
- Chewing, crunching, sucking
Discussion Questions

Think of a time you worked with a child whose behavior was challenging....

- How old were they and what types of behavior did they have?
- How did you support them?
- How would you change your approach if you use a sensory lens to understand the behavior?
Behavior through a Trauma Lens

What is trauma?
- Experiences that are scary, dangerous, or violent and cause powerful feelings of fear or helplessness

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Physical, emotional, sexual abuse
- Physical or emotional neglect
- Substance abuse or domestic violence in household
- Caregiver mental illness, loss of a parent, incarceration of a family member

Trauma is very common

Adapted from: About the Kaiser CDC - ACES Study and Childhood Trauma and Its Effect on Healthy Development

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As kids and teachers hear turn away from questions of money and all the regular about, and turn to something emerging theory about what Tough's new book *How C* takes the marshmallow test.
Trauma-Informed Approach

The single most common factor for children who end up doing well is having the support of at least one stable and committed relationship.
Creating a Safe Environment

Be Clear, Proactive and Consistent

- Expectations should be posted & shared with all kids
- Teachers should be consistent with one another
- Think about how you’re communicating expectations
  - Gestures
  - Visuals (daily picture schedule)
  - Routines/rituals
  - Music/movement
  - Jobs
  - Choices
  - Transitions (warnings, timers)

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Relationships and Connectedness

- Increase support and encouragement for the child
- Maintain unconditional positive regard
  - Children who are neglected/abused may never realize that they are lovable and can trust people
- Focus on positive attention
  - Descriptive praise

→ What can I do at this very moment to be connected with this child?
Teaching self-regulation to children

- Get down on their eye level
- Slow movement, speak in low soothing tones (softer than the child)
- Communicate empathy
- Remind them they are safe
- Calm together (help them co-regulate)
- Use the Cozy Corner
- Self-narrate calming process
  - Notice physical changes
- Make a play plan
Avoiding Common Mistakes in Behavior Management

Saying “no” or “don’t”
- Save these for emergencies only
- Tell child what to do by painting a mental picture
- “Don’t stand on the table” becomes “Put your feet on the floor”
- “Stop hitting your friend” → “Use gentle touches”

Asking questions when it’s not a choice
- Asking for compliance instead of stating expectations
- Adding “OK?” to the end of statements

Too much language
- Before age 6, kids process information more than 10x slower than adults.
- We say: “Finish your snack, get some markers, and go color over by the Feelings poster on the wall.”
- Kids might hear “get markers and color the wall”
Stages of Challenging Behavior

Peak escalation

Escalating

Regulating
Identifying the Function of Behavior

Behavior is communication

We don’t know what they’re communicating

ABC form
ABC’s of Behavior

If you are unsure why a behavior is occurring, keep a behavior log

Log ABC’s:
• Antecedent (what happened before)
• Behavior (be specific)
• Consequence (what happened right after – could be a teacher response, other children’s response, etc.)

Adapted from Bijou S.W., 1968.
Look for patterns

Look at the antecedents. What do we notice about the trigger for behaviors?
- When/where is it happening?
- With whom? (adults, certain peers)
- Is it when a child doesn’t get their way?
- Does it occur when we break routines or interrupt activities?

What can we hypothesize about the function of behaviors?
- What do you think the child is trying to communicate?

Remember some common functions of behavior:
- Escape / Avoidance
- Attention (+/-)
- Sensory
- Access to desired items
- Meeting basic needs: Food/Sleep
A replacement behavior is any positive behavior by the teacher or child used to achieve the same function as the negative behavior.

When you are thinking of a replacement behavior, select one that is in competition with the negative behavior.

For example, a child cannot hit his peers if he is clapping his hands, or bite his peers if he is chewing on a teether.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antecedent</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Replacement Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Children wait in line to wash hands for lunch | Child bites friend next to her | Child is told “ouch” and to use gentle touches | - Sensory seeking  
                             |                                  |                             | - Attention seeking       | - Teether/Chewy  
                             |                                  |                             | - Teacher guided finger play song |
Work in small groups.
Read child scenario, brainstorm what is the function for each behavior.
Brainstorm some replacement behaviors.

Remember the common functions of behavior:

- Escape / Avoidance
- Attention (+/-)
- Sensory
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Replacement Behavior - what can the child do instead to meet that same need.
References


Image 3. A Short Review on Emotional Recognition Based on Biosignal Pattern Analysis

Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259979212_A_Short_Review_on_Emotional_Recognition_Based_on_Biosignal_Pattern_Analysis


Audio/Video Clip 1. This American Life with Ira Glass and Dr. Nadine Burke Harris. Video retrieved from https://youtube.com/watch?v=ak7o9npxWD4www

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